



REPRECINCTING

fair representation in local elections

Establishing Precinct Boundaries Frequently Asked Questions

Every ten years all communities in the Commonwealth are required to review population numbers from the Federal Census and submit a new precinct map for approval by the State. The Select Board begins by reviewing a draft of new boundary lines created by the Secretary of State and then proposes adjustments, if necessary. The Select Board votes to approve the final map and precinct descriptions and submits the final map by October 30, 2021. The draft maps prepared by the State require local input as the State's mapping algorithm focuses only on population numbers, and does not account for neighborhood make up. There is a link to Reprecincting information and the initial draft maps on the [Elections Page](#).

Questions in this FAQ (click the links to visit a specific question)

[What is Arlington required to do by law?](#)

[Who is the Reprecincting Working Group?](#) (updated)

[Why is the Town considering changing the number of precincts, and how would this impact each precinct?](#)

[What happens if Arlington continues to have 21 Precincts?](#)

[How are you evaluating the equity of the different maps?](#) (new)

[How would a 16-precinct map provide a greater voice to minority groups?](#) (new)

[How does changing precincts affect the Finance Committee?](#) (new)

[Why didn't the Reprecincting Working Group create a map of least change?](#) (new)

[What kind of feedback are you seeking from residents?](#)

[Where can I find the maps we have been asked to provide feedback on?](#) (updated with links to new maps)

[How can I share feedback on the reprecincting process or any of the draft precinct maps?](#)

[How many polling locations do we have now? Would the overall number of polling locations change after reprecincting? Will my polling location change?](#) (new)

[How would reducing the number of precincts impact Town Meeting?](#)

[What precincts were adjusted based on 2000 and 2010 Census information?](#)

[Why did you draw a line down my street so my neighbor across the street is in a different precinct?](#)

[Why is the line between two precincts sometimes jagged?](#)

[How can the Select Board choose a new precinct map \(21 or 16 precincts\) when the State has not yet completed its redistricting effort?](#) (new)

What is Arlington required to do by law?

The Town must adjust the boundaries of precinct boundaries based on data from the 2020 Census.

Massachusetts State law provides the following guidelines for drawing precinct boundaries:

- Each precinct may have a maximum of 4,000 residents
- The total population in each precinct may not vary more than +/- 5% from the average precinct population
- Precincts must be geographically compact
- Municipalities should also consider race, income and other variables when adjusting precinct boundaries
- Precinct boundaries may not divide the underlying Census Blocks

Since Town Meeting Members are elected representatives of the precincts in which they live, Massachusetts State law provides additional guidelines regarding the number of Town Meeting Members:

- Towns must have as close to 240 Town Meeting Members as possible
- The number of Town Meeting Members (TMMs) in each precinct must be divisible by 3 (e.g., 12, 15, 18)

[\[back to top\]](#)

Who is the Reprecincting Working Group? UPDATED

Given the many resolutions passed by Town Meeting to celebrate past and present diversity in Arlington, as well as the Town's ongoing initiatives to advance racial equity efforts, the Town has established a Reprecincting Working Group to move beyond basic population numbers and look closely at how precinct boundaries are drawn. The Reprecincting Working Group (RWG) is comprised of the following Town staff:

- Juliana Brazile, Town Clerk
- Jillian Harvey, Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- Adam Kurowski, Director of GIS / Systems Analyst
- Kelly Lynema, Senior Planner, Department of Planning and Community Development

The RWG has sought to bring more equity to the process, considering factors such as race, ethnicity, age, income, homeownership, and equitable elections of Town Meeting Members when drafting proposed boundaries. The RWG members are professional staff convened by the Clerk to assist with drafting maps and gathering public feedback to present to the Select Board. The working group is not an official committee, so meetings are not public.

The RWG worked with the Elections Modernization Committee and the Arlington League of Women Voters to establish a process calling for feedback from as many residents as possible. This process of collecting community feedback is greatly expanded from what was done in prior decades -- this is the first instance where residents have been invited to weigh in on proposed boundaries. The Elections Modernization Committee and the Arlington League of Women Voters have also advised on the reprecincting process, and are assisting in outreach and engagement to residents.

[\[back to top\]](#)

Why is the Town considering changing the number of precincts, and how would this impact each precinct?

The Town Clerk proposes that the Town reduce the number of precincts from 21 to 16 and maintain eight polling locations. Having fewer precincts will enable the Town to respond more nimbly in adapting procedures in response to changes in election laws. Many voters will retain their same polling location. Furthermore, with each polling location hosting two precincts, every precinct will have a more uniform voting experience.

If the number of precincts is reduced to 16, the:

- Average population of each precinct would increase from about 2,200 to 2,900;
- Number of Town Meeting Members (TMMs) would decrease from 252 to 240; and
- Precincts would elect five Town Meeting Members each year for three-year terms.

While more residents would be assigned to a given polling location, trends from recent elections indicate that residents are increasingly relying on early voting, absentee voting, and voting by mail. Staffing fewer precincts on Election Day makes it easier to add election workers to staff early voting or process mailed ballots in the weeks leading up to an election.

What happens if Arlington continues to have 21 Precincts?

Due to the extent of the population change, even if the number of precincts is not reduced, the boundaries of most precincts will change, as they have in the past (see chart on pg 4). Or, the data will highlight a need to adjust certain boundaries to respect demographic change in some precincts, which will cause other boundaries to change. When a precinct boundary changes, all Town Meeting Members from that precinct must be re-elected. Any resident of voting age in the newly-drawn precinct who wishes to run may do so, and voters will elect up to 12 candidates. The top four candidates get three-year seats, the next four get two-year seats and the final four get one-year seats.

[\[back to top\]](#)

How are you evaluating the equity of the different maps? NEW!

The RWG has prepared a report, [Equity Focus Explained: Factoring Equity into the Town's Reprecincting Process](#), that explains several equity considerations and provides examples of demographic data and precinct lines to illustrate how the new draft maps were developed. To summarize the report, the first goal is to study racial and income data to create precincts that group people who are similar to each other so that the representatives they elect bring that shared experience to Town Meeting debates. We also reviewed maps that showed us housing density and ownership status to add more depth to the analysis. This process led the RWG to conclude that our internal maps better represented Arlington's population and neighborhoods than the state maps that only balance population.

[\[back to top\]](#)

How would a 16-precinct map provide a greater voice to minority groups? NEW!

With 16 precincts, the RWG was able to draw precinct boundaries that minimize the instance where multiple blocks containing higher proportions of Arlington's racial minority population were divided by a precinct line. By keeping any given minority community together within a precinct, members of that community represent a greater proportion of the overall precinct than they would if divided among two precincts. This increases the likelihood of a minority community identifying a potential TMM who represents their interests and electing that individual to represent them at Town Meeting.

When developing precincts where a greater proportion of residents live in similar housing types, identify as a particular minority group, or have a similar income level, there is a greater likelihood that they will elect a TMM (or more) who looks like them, earns a similar income, can better represent the needs of different types of homeowners or renters, and overall represent the voice of that community when voting on issues that directly affect them at town meeting.

[\[back to top\]](#)

How does changing precincts affect the Finance Committee? NEW!

Under the Town Manager Act, the Finance Committee consists of one registered voter appointed from each precinct. If the number of precincts is even then one member is appointed at large so there is an odd number of members. A similar process is used when no applicant can be found from a precinct with a vacancy and temporary appointments can be made from outside the precinct. Once the precinct lines are confirmed, the appointing board will study the map to determine how the current members are placed in relation to the precincts and whether that creates vacancies or situations where two current members now reside in the same precinct on the new map. The appointing board is the Moderator, Chair of the Finance Committee and the Chair of the Board of Trust Fund Commissioners and they traditionally meet in December.

Why didn't the Reprecincting Working Group create a map of least change? NEW!

In August, the RWG began reviewing the state's initial maps that adjusted boundary lines based on population projections but not racial or other demographic data. Studying demographic data Arlington had collected for the Connect Arlington Sustainable Transportation Plan, the RWG felt that developing new maps based on the demographic data produced better results than attempting to modify the existing lines. In addition, based on the initial draft maps the state had provided to re-balance the population and assuming we would also need to move more lines based on the final census data, it seemed likely that nearly all precinct boundaries would be changed. The RWG did not believe it was equitable to create a map that protected only a few precincts from change.

To the knowledge of the RWG members, prior reprecincting processes had not included broad efforts to incorporate factors beyond population and internal understanding of loose neighborhood boundaries. The first town-drawn maps in this year's process were based on the state-provided population projections and datasets at the block group level only, and were put forward to the community as an opportunity to gain initial feedback, since this year's reprecincting timeline is so compressed.

Working with incomplete datasets or projections instead of actual counts is a challenge--one that requires an iterative process including public feedback and a second round of updates to the draft maps in order to develop final alternatives for the Select Board's consideration. The RWG developed a detailed explanation of its [approach to reprecincting](#) and an interactive map that allows residents to explore on a map how the data relates to the various proposed precinct lines. **(Please Note: the updated FAQ may be published prior to the new website, so please check again if this link doesn't work)**

[\[back to top\]](#)

What kind of feedback are you seeking from residents?

The Town is committed to a participatory process in evaluating the four draft precinct maps. As neighborhood experts who best understand their adjacent community, all residents are invited to:

1. Identify neighborhoods or boundaries that need further study regarding the impact of dividing or combining households or the possibility of future growth. Feedback on the map is VITAL and applies whether we have 16 or 21 precincts.
 - Circle neighborhoods on a map that should be reviewed carefully
 - Submit written comments on demographic issues and concerns
2. Feedback on changing the number of precincts and the impacts on voters and voting. There are pros and cons to various details that the community is invited to explore.

[\[back to top\]](#)

Where can I find the maps we have been asked to provide feedback on? UPDATED

The RWG has prepared new drafts for both 16 and 21 Precincts that include final 2020 Census data for population and race. These two maps are linked below as a full size PDF that should allow residents to see street names if they zoom in. We do not yet have a new 21 Precinct map from the State; note that the state maps only balance population and do not factor in race at all.

- [Town Draft 2 - 16 Precincts - full size](#)
- [Town Draft 2 - 21 Precincts - full size](#)
- [State Draft 2 - 16 precincts](#)
- [Current Precinct Map](#) for reference

For comparison, we are leaving the initial round of draft maps up. These maps were provided by the Secretary of State, based on population estimates, as well as two maps developed by the Reprecincting Working Group. The Reprecincting Working Group evaluated demographic information like race, ethnicity, age, homeownership, and income, in addition to population *estimates*, to inform how precinct boundaries can be more equitably drawn, as the Town's ultimate goal in this process is to ensure fair representation in local elections.

- [State Draft – 21 Precincts](#)
- [State Draft – 16 Precincts](#)
- [Town Draft – 21 Precincts](#)
- [Town Draft – 16 Precincts](#)

[\[back to top\]](#)

How can I share feedback on the reprecincting process or any of the draft precinct maps?

Residents may submit feedback using any of the methods listed below.

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| Online: | Google Form |
| Email: | TownClerk@town.arlington.ma.us |
| Mail: | Town Clerk, 730 Massachusetts Ave, Arlington, MA 02476 |
| Drop Box: | Drop boxes are located in front Town Hall or in the parking lot off Academy St. |

Videos, recording of the public forum, and other related materials will be posted on the Elections Page of the Town Website, announced via Town Notice emails and on the Town's social media accounts. The Reprecincting Working Group will aggregate all community feedback into revised precinct map alternatives. The alternative maps and all public comments will be shared with the Select Board to inform their final decision.

[\[back to top\]](#)

How many polling locations do we have now? Would the overall number of polling locations change after reprecincting? Will my polling location change? NEW!

The Select Board designates the polling locations and can adjust them as needed to accommodate temporary building closures, construction schedules, etc. Reducing the number of precincts does not directly impact the number of polling locations. Arlington currently has eight polling locations each serving two or three precincts. The draft maps show current and potential polling locations to assist residents in visualizing the impact on them. Because we expect more residents to vote by mail going forward, increasing the number of polling locations is probably not necessary and adds to the cost of each election.

As in the past, the Town remains committed to working with local service providers like the Council on Aging, Veterans' Affairs, and the League of Women Voters of Arlington to provide transportation for residents for whom getting to their polling location is a barrier.

[\[back to top\]](#)

How would reducing the number of precincts impact Town Meeting?

The number of Town Meeting Members (TMMs) per precinct would change, as would the geographic area of each precinct.

- Each voter gains three more TMMs from their precinct (15 instead of 12)
- The Town loses a total of 12 TMMs overall (252 reduces to 240)
- The area of each precinct increases which expands the pool of Town Meeting Member candidates for any given precinct

- On average, each Town Meeting Member would represent an additional 700 residents

[\[back to top\]](#)

What precincts were adjusted based on 2000 and 2010 Census information?

The gray boxes indicate precincts affected the last two times Arlington redrew the boundaries.

2002 - 13 of 21 precincts had boundary changes							2012 - 15 of 21 precincts had boundary changes						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21	15	16	17	18	19	20	21

[\[back to top\]](#)

Why did you draw a line down my street so my neighbor across the street is in a different precinct?

The standards for precinct boundaries specify the center line of streets should be used because that is how census blocks were established. It's how the lines work now, although you may not know if you haven't lived on a boundary street before.

Because of the state's requirement that the population of each individual precinct is within 5% of the mean size of all precincts, precincts with higher population density will have a smaller geographic area than precincts with lower population density. Our overall map will attempt to ensure that each precinct is balanced, but it's not possible to create a map that perfectly captures each resident's conception of their neighborhood's boundaries.

[\[back to top\]](#)

Why is the line between two precincts sometimes jagged?

The census blocks themselves sometimes have odd shapes, but it may also be that to balance the numbers in a precinct we need one or two blocks moved into the next precinct and might review the demographic information of the two possible blocks to choose the one that matches the precinct best. This does not violate the compactness standard.

The Secretary of State's staff met with Reprecincting Working Groups over the summer to help explain the details to each community. [You can review the presentation here.](#)

[\[back to top\]](#)

How can the Select Board choose a new precinct map (21 or 16 precincts) when the State has not yet completed its redistricting effort? **NEW!**

The reprecincting process always starts with the local precinct boundaries, which the legislature then uses to draw district boundaries. The goal is to include important local knowledge on the placement of lines that respect local neighborhoods. As an example, one apartment complex could consist of two census blocks. A state map could easily divide the apartment complex, but a locally-drawn map would not. This year, due to the compressed timeline stemming from delays in the 2020 Census data release, if the legislative district map is later drawn to divide one of our precincts, we have the option of asking to adjust our map that uses the same state boundary. If that isn't possible, then it is legal (albeit potentially confusing) for the residents in one

precinct to have different ballots allowing them to vote for different representatives than a neighbor down the street in their same precinct.

How many precincts do other Towns in Massachusetts have?

Data on the number of precincts in other communities

Population	Town	Minimum No. Precincts	Actual No. Precincts	Residents/ Precinct
59,000	Brookline	15	16	3,688
57,000	Medford	15	16	3,563
56,500	Plymouth	15	15	3,767
43,700	Arlington	11	21	2,081
40,000	Billerica	11	11	3,636
36,200	Natick	10	10	3,620
33,000	Andover	9	9	3,667
32,900	Watertown	9	12	2,742
31,300	N Andover	8	8	3,913
31,000	Lexington	8	9	3,444
29,500	Needham	8	10	2,950
27,500	Melrose	7	14	1,964
27,200	Milton	7	10	2,720
25,200	Belmont	7	8	3,150
25,200	Reading	7	8	3,150
21,900	Winchester	6	8	2,738
21,600	Stoneham	6	7	3,086

The highlighted communities are those we most often compare ourselves to (a.k.a. “The Town Manager’s 12”). Those 12 communities, not including Arlington, average 3,237 residents per precinct.

[\[back to top\]](#)

Document date: 9/7/2021; updated 10/1/2021